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PSC USES SERVICE QUALITY PENALTY MONEY TO FUND 4 PROPOSALS THAT BENEFIT NEEDY MONTANANS

The state Public Service Commission today voted to use the \$160,000 in service quality penalties paid by US West Communications to fund telecommunications proposals from four organizations that serve needy Montanans.

The PSC received 20 suggestions for use of the money and decided on funding these four that were judged to best meet the PSC's goals of helping needy Montanans who have unmet telecommunications needs:

- \$83,000 to the **Department of Public Health & Human Services** for a media campaign to make low-income Montanans aware of the availability of the Montana Telephone Assistance Program, which provides eligible persons with discounts on telephone hookups and monthly phone bills. A portion of this grant will also be used to develop an televised educational message regarding consumer protections against telephone slamming.
- \$60,000 to the **Montana Legal Services Association** for installation of the phone facilities necessary to create an automated legal information service telephone system to answer frequently asked questions about specific areas of law. The MLSA is a nonprofit program which provides civil legal assistance to Montana's low-income population.
- \$16,000 to fund a toll-free phone line and outreach campaign for the **Crisis Line in Great Falls**. Crisis Line is a nonprofit organization that provides callers to its hotline with crisis intervention and referrals for assistance to local community agencies.
- \$1,000 for installation of a phone line at the riding arena and one year's monthly phone service for the **Butte Special Riders**, a nonprofit program that provides therapeutic and recreational horseback riding for disabled children.

The money in the service quality penalty fund accumulated as a result of US West's failures to meet certain service quality targets in accordance with the agreement between the company and the PSC that settled the PSC's 1994 lawsuit against the company. US West met most of the service objectives required by the agreement's service improvement plan, which ended March 31.

According to the terms of the settlement agreement, it was up to the PSC to direct the use of the money in the penalty account, as long as it was used to enhance telecommunications in US West's service territory in Montana.

"The commission is pleased to be able to assist these worthy organizations with their telecommunications needs," said PSC Chairman Dave Fisher.

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